
[“It has Always been the same”: Cooperation that does not Cooperate](#)

This article is about how so-called ‘development cooperation’ hides, and grants legitimacy to, an agenda of dispossession and capitalist expansion; and how this ‘cooperation’ actually co-opts the political agenda of grassroots movements, by prioritizing discussions, interests and practices that are alien and imposed from the outside.

The experience that motivated writing this article took place in the city of Pisco, Peru, where a devastating earthquake left almost half a million people seriously affected. But this province has experienced many violent interventions throughout its history, from the plantations imposed during the Spanish conquest, which demanded slave labor, to the mega-port that currently exports minerals and gas—most of which is extracted in the context of community conflict and dispossession, in the mountains and forests of Peru.

One day, while I was visiting a group of women who have organized in an Afro-Peruvian community, an army truck arrived. Inside it was the wife of the commander assigned to the area. From the truck, she threw donated clothes to people waiting for her to pass by.

The women managed to get some clothes and shoes out of this donation. Doña Felicia, the president of the community, had “fished out” some size S pantyhose and small heels. During the meeting break, she stretched them out, looked at them, and with a crack of a smile, commented: “I thought they might give us some boots and clothes in our size. It’s not that I’m ungrateful, but these pantyhose don’t fit me, and the heels won’t work here in the field.” Ultimately, she left the clothes in a corner and we continued with our meeting. That scene made me reflect on many aspects of external *aid*; on the true interests of *development cooperation*, and on whether, ultimately, it is nothing more than a bid for neocolonialism in disputed territories.

A bit of history

Development cooperation emerged as a new arena after the Second World War. *Development aid* was institutionalized in the 1950s and 1960s, and self-styled *developed* countries began to include it as a stable component of their foreign policy. Gradually, the concept of *development aid* evolved to become *development cooperation*. By the late 1960s, the economic crisis (which has been with us ever since) could be glimpsed, and declarations about justice and the need for cooperation were part of the governing principles set forth in world economic relations.

There was an attempt at that time to radicalize the concept of people’s right to *development*. However, *development cooperation* continued to favor monetarist and free-market policies, which increased inequality between the North and the South.

Paradoxically, the amount of funds channeled to Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGDOs) has been increasing significantly since the 1970s. Initially, this was done to channel direct aid to territories where NGDOs had coverage, and where they escaped government control in their countries (in many cases, with dictatorial governments). Later, from the 1980s to 2000, NGDOs

helped finance projects that governments were unable to finance, due to neoliberal policies imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Currently, financing for Latin America and the Caribbean is focused on disputed territories; that is, in territories where there are proposals to initiate or expand industrial operations and/or their associated infrastructure.

Donors and stakeholders

Despite proclaiming an ideology of respect and non-intervention in territories, *development cooperation agencies* have formulated their own objectives—determining, in fact, what is done with their money in our countries. Starting in the 1960s, some *cooperation* programs also began to incorporate strategies and projects with a “focus on gender,” with the alleged purpose of eliminating discrimination against women; and since the mid-1990s, there has been talk of eliminating gender inequality.

But despite the fact that incorporating a “focus on gender” was in response to feminist and women’s movements around the world, for the most part, this “focus” has actually ended up legitimizing industrial operations and interventions in community territories. Frequently, this “focus” is added to project documents so that the *cooperation* agency gains legitimacy and acceptance. In many cases, it takes advantage of the extremely vulnerable situations in which women find themselves, so that they will accept financing or *aid* that does not actually align with their struggles, beliefs or real needs.

So, where does the money for *development cooperation* come from?

First of all, there are the cooperation NGOs, with a wide variety of contributors, including the following: churches, lay solidarity groups, political parties, unions, companies, etc. These contributors channel resources from various sources: government aid, intergovernmental aid, public collections, and their own funds.

Cooperation agencies in Northern countries are a second modality. These *agencies* primarily manage government funds, which follow strategic objectives defined by each Congress or Parliament according to their priorities and foreign policy. These objectives are aligned with the United Nations’ Agenda, which has articulated 17 Sustainable Development Goals to meet by 2030. Incidentally, these goals are also aligned with free-market interests, “green” capitalism and the foreign policies of countries in the North.

However, another important source of funding for the *agencies* are funds from the business sector (banking, contractor companies, public-private partnerships, for-profit foundations or corporations). Countries in the North are increasingly trying to get companies to invest—according to these countries’ policies and interests—in territories primarily in the South. In this way, *cooperation* actually acts as a straitjacket to strengthen the *status quo* of globalized liberalism.

So, why doesn’t *development cooperation* actually aid in matters that truly concern communities?

When interests are not aligned

Let’s think about this: Doña Felicia wanted good rubber boots and thick socks for the field; that is, clothing that would be useful for her reality. The *aid* received did not respond to a real need.

Likewise, extractive activities are generally proclaimed to promote *development* for communities, but they systematically ignore the real needs and tireless struggles of people saying NO to impositions

and predatory extractive activities. Communities have other needs and priorities, which are very alien to *donor* countries' and their corporate financiers' foreign policies.

In the same way, *cooperation* programs and projects aimed specifically at women almost never take into account women's real needs and interests, much less women's processes, reflections and struggles in the places where they supposedly provide *aid*. One could say that many *cooperation* programs with a "gender focus" even end up co-opting women's political agendas, by prioritizing discussions, interests and practices that are imposed from the outside.

Interests clearly do not line up. While *Cooperation Agencies* (with government and business funding) are quite interested in facilitating the ongoing intervention of large-scale projects in territories and river basins, communities risk their lives to defend these same territories. It is necessary to clarify that the funding comes with conditions. Governments grant companies impunity and flexibility on environmental and labor regulations in the places where they operate, causing more conflict and dispossession for communities.

Doña Felicia knows what to do

After the meeting in the community in Pisco, I reflected with Doña Felicia about what had happened. We gradually reached the conclusion that it has always been the same. Many foreigners believe that they have the solution to communities' problems, and they impose their external measures and interfere in communities' lives and customs, under the pretext of wanting to improve them.

"These people never know what our needs are," she told me, disappointed. "It has always been the same," she continued. "Authorities and people from cities think that because we are poor, we don't know what we need. At any rate, we always start over with what we have," she told me, lost in thought.

She also added: "Listen friend, we [women] here in the community have organized as a result of the earthquake; we are rebuilding our homes little by little; we are overcoming the pain of our loss, and we know that we must go on. That is fate. Our community is very united; you will see how we will soon celebrate life again...because, you know, it is enough to have pure water, our farms, our healthy children. We have enough if we have our arms and legs to work. We do not need anything more."

Indeed, Doña Felicia is right: We [the women] and the communities do not need *development agencies* to tell us what our priorities are, what we should defend and what not, what is right and what is wrong, or what the limit is between economic growth and our true *development*.

Development cooperation is often a wolf in sheep's clothing, eager to enter territories in order to devour them. And in this context, it is urgent that we protect those who are defending life and their territories, because they are stigmatized, criminalized, harassed, threatened or killed with total impunity on a daily basis. As the ancestors of *Abya Yala* prophetically declared, this is "The Empire of Greed."

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